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SUBJECT: KARBALA DROUGHT MASKS DEEPER WATER WOES

REF: BAGHDAD 2232

Classified By: PRT Team Leader Don Cooke for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

This is a PRT Karbala Reporting Cable.

11. (C) Summary: Water, Karbala,s most precious resource, has become increasingly scarce in recent years, posing challenges to continued economic development in the province. Drought is the apparent culprit, with below-average rainfall during the past several years. Water scarcity is also the product of a series of policy choices harmful to Karbala, including the construction of dams along the upper Euphrates, and general neglect during the Saddam years. PRT is working with provincial authorities to upgrade basic water and irrigation infrastructure. End Summary.

A Fading Oasis

12. (SBU) Compared to most of its neighbors, Iraq is blessed with adequate fresh water. Karbala,s largely agrarian economy exemplifies Iraq,s dependence on water. In the last three decades, however, the Euphrates River,s rich alluvial plain has faced desertification. Consequently, the province has seen fertility dwindle, salinity levels in the soil rise, and land that once supported thriving farms succumb to desertification. Drought is the apparent culprit. Rainfall amounts in the province normally average approximately 6 to 8 inches per year. During the last two years, however, rainfall averages have not topped 4 inches. Regional river systems, particularly the Euphrates, have seen reduced flows, hindering local farmers, ability to channel water to their fields. The infamous shamal wind each summer seems to kick up larger and more frequent dust storms, stripping the land of fertile topsoil and choking irrigation and drainage channels with silt.

More Than Meets the Eye

13. (C) Instead of drought, human factors -- political, economic, and social -- underlie much of Karbala,s water woes. The issue of internally displaced persons, for example, appears at first glance to have more to do with conflict and oppression than with water. Staff members from Karbala,s Education Directorate shared a different perspective during a meeting with PRT members on July 8. According to figures they compiled in June 2008, 16,000 families in Karbala province with school-age children have been economically displaced due to water-related reasons. Most of these, they asserted, formerly worked small farms in the west of the province but have migrated to urban areas in the east in search of work because of the land,s declining ability to sustain agriculture. (Note: Provincial Council Member Mohsen al-Kenani told PRT officers on July 16 that Karbala,s population includes 964,000 registered and approximately 600,000 unregistered inhabitants. End Note.)

14. (C) During a visit to the western Karbala village of Ayn Tamur to deliver a QRF-funded tractor on July 14 (reftel),

PRT officers listened as tribal elders scoffed at the idea that lack of adequate rainfall was responsible for farm failures in the area. They stated that the level of the Euphrates River -- the chief source of water for irrigation -- has fallen 1.5 meters each year for several years. The river's salinity has increased and, therefore, so has the land's. Farmers have gone from working large spreads producing grains (in particular rice) to small plots growing vegetables. The lowering of the Euphrates has effectively left many irrigation canals and ditches high and dry, exacerbating erosion and dust storms. The latter, the chiefs averred, used to occur perhaps twice a year but now strike nearly every month.

Blaming Turks...

15. (C) PRT officers played host to two provincial directors general, Mehdi Mohammad Ali of Water Resources and Haider Abd al-Abbas of Drinking Water, on July 17. They, too, dismissed the idea that lower-than-average rainfall is to blame for the apparent drought in Karbala (precipitation levels have remained steady for decades, according to Ali), saying it has more to do with politics and resource mismanagement. Ali stated that Turkey bears much of the blame for Karbala's water woes because it is responsible for the Euphrates, reduced flow. He claimed that Ankara uses water to press Baghdad for concessions, including cheap oil. He went on to state that, following the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, many in the province were hopeful Washington would use its clout with the Turks to insist they turn on the tap and increase the river's flow.

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16. (C) That this has not happened means as much to Karbala investors as it does to farmers, Ali observed. He said plans to develop eco-tourism at Lake Razzaza are in doubt because there is insufficient water in the area for hotels. Moreover, unless the Euphrates flow increases, the lake itself may not survive, eliminating the unique habitat that attracts waterfowl and makes it a potential attraction. Further downstream, industry also feels the pinch in terms of decreased availability of water for manufacturing processes. As for farmers, the river's increasing salinity has forced them to switch from flood irrigation (necessary to leach salts from the heavy clay soil) on lands that have been farmed effectively for millennia to drip, sprinkler, and pipe irrigation on desert tracts that are productive only for a few seasons. The results, according to Ali, have been the conversion of heretofore settled agrarian communities into itinerant farmers--thus exacerbating urban migration and other social problems--and desertification in once-fertile areas, particularly in the west.

...and Jerks

17. (C) Abd al-Abbas balanced Ali's views by noting that disastrous water-management policies undertaken by Saddam's regime during the 1980s and 1990s set the stage for Karbala's current calamity. During the Iran-Iraq war, for example, Baghdad--to avoid tensions with its northwestern neighbor--raised no objection to the dozens of dams Ankara built on the Euphrates. In 1987, Saddam ordered the diversion of the river to flood Lake Razzaza as a strategic water reserve with predictably disastrous results; untold numbers of birds, fish and other wildlife perished while crops withered.

18. (C) Abd al-Abbas continued that the river systems that supply Karbala's drinking water suffered from sheer neglect during the 1990s as the regime shifted its priorities to survival amid sanctions. The government simply stopped paying for the dredging and maintenance required to keep the canals operable. At the same time, Iraq in general and

Karbala in particular was invaded (he claimed from Iran) by non-native water plants. These have further clogged the works. According to Abd al-Abbas, Karbala once had a surplus of drinking water that--even accounting for population growth (including unregistered inhabitants)--would have been more than sufficient for current needs. Today, however, it is able to provide water to only 75 percent of people in the province. Abd al-Abbas and Ali appealed for PRT help in acquiring equipment enabling their directorates to clear canals and restore irrigation channels.

Comment

19. (C) Comment: Karbala's water woes underscore its fragility. Apparently suffering from a drought, it really is dealing with the consequences of 30 years of poor resource management. All is not lost, however. The basic infrastructure, as well as instincts honed over generations, remain and will play a large role in determining how successful the province will be in reversing the tide of desertification and reaching its full agricultural, industrial, and touristic potential. While larger issues such as relations with Turkey are well beyond the scope of what can be done locally, the PRT is exploring ways to help through the QRF and other mechanisms. End Comment.
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